So, let’s be honest; Congress these days doesn’t rank too high on people’s lists of most trusted institutions. According to many, what is supposed to be the “people’s branch” of government has drifted from its founding principles. Among other things, it is said that our national legislature doesn’t get enough done, is too controlled by unrepresentative interest groups and exhibits unreasonable levels of conflict and partisanship. In addition, too many members of the legislature manage to get themselves involved in scandals.

Are these charges fair? Is the branch of government to which the founders granted the most power and expected to be the most representative really doing such a poor job?

With a primary focus on the U.S. Congress, this course seeks to take a closer look to analyze these and related questions about how the U.S. government really works and to provide an introduction to the understanding of legislative processes.

The course is organized into three sections: 1.) the historical background and internal workings of Congress, 2.) the role of Congress as the representative voice of the people in their districts, and 3.) the role of Congress as an actor in the broader U.S. political system.

Within each of these areas, we will consider broader themes. Given that Congress is designed to be the “representative” branch of government, we will be examining in detail the complexity of the term “representation” and will be evaluating how representative we think the current U.S. Congress really is.

Second, there has been considerable change in the internal power structure of Congress as it has moved from a relative oligarchy in the 1950s and 1960s, to a chamber of “independent entrepreneurs” during the 1970s and 1980s, to a body dominated by strong partisanship in recent years. We will examine the reasons for these changes and consider their implications for American public policy.

Finally, throughout, we will be discussing the life of a congressperson: What does the job entail, what motivates individual members of Congress, and what implications do these characteristics of legislators have for the larger system of governance?

Therefore, the learning objectives of the course are to:

a. Develop a solid understanding of how the U.S. Congress and its legislators actually function
b. Compare/contrast the advantages/disadvantages of alternative forms of political representation and their consequences.
c. With reference to the historical roots, identify and evaluate the changes that have taken place in Congress over the last several decades.
d. Compare and contrast similarities and differences between the House, Senate and to a lesser extent other legislatures.
e. Compare/contrast alternative ways by which individual citizens and groups might influence members of Congress.
f. Locate yourself on a continuum: Where do you stand on some of the controversies and debates we have discussed?
g. Connect current events, controversies and the activities of current members of Congress to the theories/concepts discussed in class.

Books and Readings

There is no single text for this course but a variety of articles, book chapters and alternative perspectives on Congress are on blackboard and makes up the reading material for this class. You are expected to complete at least one reading prior to the vast majority of class sessions.

Some of the books that I have taken several readings from include:


Requirements

1. Two Midterm exams: 10/14, 15% and 11/25, 20%
2. Two-part Final Exam: short in-class part, 12/6 and 3-5 page take-home essay due Monday 12/16, 20%
3. 5 short papers (1.5 to 2 pages), 25%
4. Participation (attendance, discussion) and quizzes (both announced and unannounced), 20%

Note: For the series of short papers, you will be following a legislator (House Representative, Senator or State Legislator) throughout the course of the semester. You can either select a person of interest to you or you will be assigned a member of Congress. For each short paper (generally 1.5 to 2 pages), you will be collecting factual information about your legislator’s behavior illustrating important theories explored during the course. The purpose of the papers is to test out how concepts and ideas we study in class apply to the particular congress member you have chosen. Details and requirements for each assignment will be explained in class, and the directions for paper #1 are at the end of this syllabus. Please note that, for purposes of the short papers, any material taken directly or word for word from an outside source must be explicitly quoted and all sources must be cited in a bibliography. Papers should be turned in via e-mail, and a hard copy should also be provided. The first paper will be due September 11. Thereafter, a paper will be due approximately every other week. Since your job is to do five, you can pick and choose topics, so you can spread the papers out across the semester. The papers must be turned in on time; you cannot wait till the end of the term to turn in all papers!
**Note:** Papers will be graded on a continuum from “minus” to “check” to “plus” (thus a scale of “1” to “5”).

**Plagiarism and Academic Honesty**

The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work, words, or ideas as if they were your own without giving the original author credit by citing him or her. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please contact me before submitting assignments for grading. Plagiarism violations will result in disciplinary action. Additionally, it goes without saying that students are expected to meet the broader standards of academic honesty expected of students at a major university.

See link on University policy: http://www.albany.edu/eas/104/penalty.htm

See also the UAlbany Library “Plagiarism 101” Tutorial: http://library/albany.edu/usered/tut.html

**Students with Disabilities**

If you need any class accommodations due to a disability, please utilize University resources as needed, and please let the professor know well in advance of any assignments requiring accommodation(s). It is a function of the University to provide such accommodations as needed.

**Class Topics and Readings**

* all readings available on Blackboard.

** Dates subject to change depending on progress and interest; exam and paper due dates are fixed.

**Part I: Introduction and Basic concepts (8/26-9/6)**

8/26: Introduction
8/28: Criteria to Evaluate congress
   Taylor, Ch. 1 and 2, Congress: A Performance Appraisal (Westview Press, 2013)
8/30: Issue Debate: CQ Researcher: Student aid
   What role did Congress play on this issue? How did the role of Congress compare to that of other government institutions? What about actors outside government, e.g. the public, interest groups, etc.? What would you have liked these roles to be? What should happen next?
9/4 The Nuts and Bolts
   Davidson, Oleszek and Lee, Ch. 1, Congress and Its Members
9/6 No Class (you get a Yom Kipur break but you have reading—and a paper due 9/11!)

**Part II: Inside congress (9/9-10/4)**

9/9-9/11 Historical Development
9/9 Zelizer Ch. 1 “From the Old Congress to the New,” The American Congress: The Building of Democracy
9/11 Zelizer Ch. 3 “Democracy, Gentility, and Lobbying,” *The American Congress: The Building of Democracy*
Burden, Ch. 1 *The Personal Roots of Representation* (Princeton University Press, 2007)
**First Paper Due (Mandatory)**

9/13 Even Stable Institutions Change
Zelizer Bios: Clay, Webster, Calhoun, and Sumner

9/16-9/27: Overview of the Legislative Process
9/16-9/18: Parties and Party Leaders
Davidson, Oleszek and Lee, Ch. 6
Jacobson, “Partisanship, Money, and Competition,” *Congress Reconsidered*
Robert Draper, Chs. 6 and 9, *When the Tea Party Came to Town*
Zelizer Bios: Cannon and O’Neil

9/20-9/23 Committees
Davidson, Oleszek, and Lee, Ch. 7
Zelizer, Ch. 29 “McCarthyism in Congress,” *The American Congress: The Building of Democracy*
Frey, Ch. 25 Lehman, *Inside the House: Former Members Reveal How Congress Really Works*
Zelizer Bios: Chisholm

9/25-9/27: Rules
Davidson, Oleszek and Lee, Ch. 8
Ellis and Nelson, Ch. 12: “Resolved, Senate Rule XXII should be amended so that filibusters can be ended by a majority vote,” **PRO:** Steven S. Smith; **CON:** Wendy J. Schiller, *Debating Reform*
9/27 **Second paper due.**

9/30-10/4 Putting It Together: Simulation, Examples and Review
CQ Researcher article on issue of our choice for class simulation
Kingdon, “Models of Legislative Voting,” *The American Congress Reader*
Frey, Ch. 8 Downy, Ch. 16 Bartlet, Ch. 36 and 28 Frey, Ch 30 Whitehurst, Ch 10 McCarthy *Inside the House: Former Members Reveal How Congress Works*
Zelizer bios: Rankin, Lodge, Powell
10/4 **Third Paper Due**

**Part III: Constituencies, Elections and Representation (10/7-11/6)**

10/7-10/9 Constituencies and Redistricting
Davidson, Oleszek and Lee, Ch. 3, p. 41-56
Zelizer, Ch. 31 “The Warren Court and the Political Process,” The American Congress: The Building of Democracy
Ellis and Nelson, Ch. 10: “Resolved, the redistricting process should be nonpartisan,” PRO: Michael P. McDonald; CON: Justin Buchler
Ellis and Nelson, Debating Reform, Ch. 11: “The Senate Should Represent People, Not States: PRO: Bruce I. Oppenheimer; CON: John J. Pitney Jr., Debating Reform

10/11 First Midterm
10/14 No Class

10/16-1025 Campaigns and elections
10/16 Overview
Davidson, Oleszek and Lee, Chapter 3 pp. 56-63
Frey, Ch 2 Holtzman and Ch. 3 Garcia, Inside the House: Former Members Reveal How Congress Really works
10/18 Pre-campaign Processes
Jacobson Ch 3 “Candidates” The Politics of Congressional Elections
10/21-10/23 Campaigns
Jacobson Ch 4 “Candidates” The Politics of Congressional Elections
10/25 Voters and Voting
Jacobson Ch 5 “Voters” The Politics of Congressional Elections

Fourth Paper Due

10/28-10/30 Home Styles
Friedman, read one of Ch. 3-6, Dilemmas of Representation (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007)

11/1 Women and Minorities in Congress, Review for Exam

Fifth Paper Due

11/4-11/6: Election Simulation
11/4 Mandatory 1-page position statement
11/6 Ellis and Nelson, Ch. 7: “Resolved: proportional representation should be adopted for U.S. House elections,” PRO: Douglas J. Amy; CON: Mark Rush, Debating Reform

Part IV: Congress and the Larger Political System

11/8-11/22: Readings TBA
In this part of the course, we will examine the role of Congress in the handling of several specific issues, particularly as compared to the president and the courts.

11/11 Sixth Paper Due
11/22  **Seventh paper due**
11/25: Second exam
11/27-11/29 No class

12/2/-12/9: Congress and Civic Engagement
   Friedman, “The Role of Congressional Outreach in Civic Engagement”
   Weissburg, “Collective vs Dyadic Representation in Congress” *The American Congress Reader*

12/4: How to Make Congress work Better
   Debates: given all we have learned, how good a job is Congress doing? What are the relevant evaluative criteria by which we should judge? How does Congress compare to other (state) legislatures? What improvements should be made?
   Ellis and Nelson, Ch. 3: “Resolved, the United States should adopt a national initiative and referendum, “**PRO:** Todd Donovan; **CON:** Richard Ellis
   Ellis and Nelson, Ch. 9: “Resolved, the size of the House should be changed to 675 seats, **PRO:** Brian Fredericks; **CON:** G. Lawrence Evans, *Debating Reform*

12/6 First part of final exam
12/9 Wrap up and Second part of final exam handed out, Due 12/18.
   **Eighth paper due**

**Short Paper Topics and Deadlines**

Topic 1: Member Backgrounds Due: 9/11
Topic 2: Inside Congress Due: 9/27
Topic 3: Simulation Reflection Due: 10/4
Topic 4: Elections Due: 10/25
Topic 5: Home Styles Due: 11/1
Topic 6: Comparing Legislatures Due: 11/11
Topic 7: President, Congress, and Policy Due: 11/22
Topic 8: Wrap-up Due: 12/9

*Please note that although you have choice of topics, you are required to hand in at least 2 of the five papers BY 10/25

*Paper topics can only be submitted on the due dates outlined, they will not be accepted past this date.
**Paper #1: Member Backgrounds (mandatory for all)**

Due: 9/11  
Approx. 2 pages.  
Send via e-mail and provide hard copy.  
Note: if you e-mail as an attachment, please send as a “doc”, “docx”, “txt” or “rtf” file.  
Note: use at least two sources.

**Suggested Sources:** websites of legislators (www.house.gov or www.senate.gov), campaign websites, *Almanac of American Politics* or *Politics in America* (reference section in library), the Thomas.gov website or material you obtain from searching the web; Lexis-Nexus is also a possibility. All directly quoted material needs to be in quotes and properly cited, and all sources used also need to be cited.

**Influence of Member Background:** Select a member of a legislature at the state or national level. The legislator may or may not represent your district and may or may not be from New York. Find out as much as you can about his/her background—family and roots, education, prior political experience, etc. Also research a few of the legislator’s major accomplishments in office. What is he known for? What does she spend time working on? What does he tell constituents he/she has accomplished? Based on this analysis, in what ways do you think that the background of the legislator has influenced his/her activity as a public official?

For purposes of this assignment, you may provide lists of (1) the most important or interesting 3 or 4 things you found out about the member’s background and (2) the most important 3 or 4 things you found out about what the member does. Then write a paragraph or two thinking through whether you think there is a connection between the legislator’s background and his/her activities.